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UN Commission on the Status of Women

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THE STATUS OF WOMEN

PATRICIA LICUANAN, Chairman of the thirty-ninth session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, discusses a number of issues concerning the work of the Commission and the forthcoming World Conference on Women. Improvement in the status of women since the first World Conference on Women some 20 years ago has been limited due to social, cultural and religious barriers in many countries of the world. The Beijing Conference will address 11 areas of concern vital to achieving equality among men and women. Eradicating poverty and expanding health, educational and economic opportunities are prerequisite factors for women's economic and social development. Ms. Licuanan believes that the issue of accreditation to the Conference is handled according to the accreditation norms followed by the United Nations and that China will issue entry visas to all those accredited by the World Organization.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle.**

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle.**

As we approach the end of this century, the drive for women's rights has accelerated and taken on powerful and global momentum. In the last two decades since the first United Nations conference on women, the campaign for equality between men and women has witnessed significant changes and advances. But just how much have these advances improved the life of the average woman? And how deep is the commitment of governments to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women?

Our guest today is in a unique position to reflect on these issues and on the preparations for the forthcoming World Conference on Women to be held in China later this year. She is Patricia Licuanan, Chairman of the 39th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Joining me to talk with Ms. Licuanan are Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*. Ms. Licuanan, welcome to World Chronicle.

LICUANAN: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Licuanan, we've heard a lot about the "angry white males" in the United States who were supposed to have decided the outcome of the 1994 election which sent Republican majorities to the House and the Senate. I know you're not American, although you've had a lot of experience in the United States, and my question does not relate to the United States so much as to men and women. Why aren't there more angry women? I mean, it seems to me, although in our introduction we talked about advances, women still have an awfully long way to go. Why aren't women really pushing harder?

LICUANAN: On the contrary, I feel there are an awful lot of angry women, and they have been a lot more vocal, a lot more active, and they have organized and mobilized themselves to be very strong advocates for certain positions. But if so, then your question goes, why have these changes not occurred? Well, it's partly because of the angry males in the sense that the world is still a male-dominated world and perspectives have yet to change. What women have been able to accomplish since Nairobi, for instance --

LITTLEJOHNS: Nairobi was the --?

LICUANAN: The 1985 meeting to actually assess the Decade for Women, which was 1976-1985. The assessment of the implementation of the document that came out of Nairobi, which is the Forward-looking Strategies [for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000], commented that laws had changed quite favourably towards women, that there

was a lot of new legislation on equality between women and men. And that certainly is a very, very good sign. But, unfortunately, it also recognized that actual behaviours of people, both men and women, had not changed in step with legislation, and so much of this legislation remained for the most part unimplemented. And that's certainly a serious concern.

LITTLEJOHNS: Would you say that this is largely for cultural reasons?

LICUANAN: Yes, I would say basically the barriers of culture, of social norms, are much more difficult to tackle than the legal barriers.

LITTLEJOHNS: And religion perhaps also?

LICUANAN: Religion is part of culture, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: The Pope has declined to have women ordained, and this seems to be more or less set in concrete.

LICUANAN: Yes, I would say that culture and religion certainly have their very, very important and very beneficial aspects, but they are the least open to change in many ways, and the issues of women need a change of paradigm and a change of attitudes and values.

DEEN: Whenever a UN conference adopts a programme of action or a plan of action, they always have a price tag. For example, the Earth Summit in Rio said they needed about $125 billion dollars to implement the programme of action. Then the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo needed $17 billion. But I'm told that you're not going to put a price tag on your programme of action, and some say if you don't have the money, the whole thing will be an exercise in futility.

LICUANAN: We have a section in our draft platform for action, which we hope will be approved in Beijing, on financial arrangements. But perhaps, as you pointed out, we are not getting into dollars and cents. We will be talking about what kind of resources would be needed, and where, and what types of priorities should be agreed upon for funding, but we will not get into how much this will cost.

DEEN: Is it because western countries are opposed to a dollar figure?

LICUANAN: I can't be that specific, but yes, there is some resistance to being very committed or being held to a position where they would have to make very definite contributions. There is definitely a discomfort with that, so we're trying to find a point of compromise where we will talk about the need for resources and yet not pin down specific governments to specific contributions. That will still be a problem with us.

BASSIR POUR: Professor, you told Michael that there are lots of angry women -- that's absolutely true. Most of them that we see around the United Nations are non-governmental organizations. Now, they're angry at their governments, they're angry at

men, but they're very angry at the Conference itself. One, because of the accreditations -- I'd like you to explain that. Secondly, because apparently they're not being allowed into some of the meetings. And as you well know, of course, NGOs are being used more and more to pass on the message to the governments and exert pressure on them. So why is it that these women are angry?

LICUANAN: If you're talking about the recent conference, the recent Preparatory Committee meetings, well, of course, they're angry because of the basic issues that they represent. And so that I think we share, they share.

BASSIR POUR: No, I mean at the Conference.

LICUANAN: At the Conference.

BASSIR POUR: Absolutely, yes.

LICUANAN: First, there was the issue of accreditation, which of course started the whole fuss to begin with. So that is part of the issue of access. Basically there are procedures in the UN where the Conference secretariat processes all the applications for accreditation to the Prepcom [Preparatory Committee] as well as to the World Conference. So a list was put out, and this is proposed to the Prepcom, to the Commission on the Status of Women, for approval, for action. Now, at the recent conference, there were groups that were left off the list. They did not meet specific criteria for accreditation. And of course that disturbed a lot of people, so that was questioned. And a special intergovernmental committee was formed by the Commission to process the complaints and the concerns. Essentially, it got down to a certain -- I'm not sure if I can recall all the norms -- but first, some were not accredited because, well, basically, they did not meet the deadline, they were not able to give all the information....

BASSIR POUR: If I may, it's more than just bureaucratic --

LICUANAN: Oh, no, that's the first reason, yes.

BASSIR POUR: I mean, let's address the political problems, such as some countries didn't want the NGOs; or the Vatican, who is not even a Member State, it's just an observer, and it's exerting too much pressure. How do you deal with this kind of pressure from governments?

LICUANAN: The Vatican issue was settled very quickly. We formed a working group, and immediately they made a decision that those groups --

LITTLEJOHNS: Pro-choice groups.

LICUANAN: -- questioned by the Vatican could be accredited, and they were accredited *ad referendum*, initially *ad referendum*, and then accredited. Then the question was those that were political groups. And unfortunately, that is one of the realities in the UN. There are certain procedures for handling groups that somehow don't have any kind

of recognition by Member States, but which are also part of that country in a sense, and so there are rules about processing groups like that.

BASSIR POUR: So there's nothing you can do, for example, for Tibetan women or --

LICUANAN: We just have to go into negotiations. And that has been tried, both bilaterally between the strong advocates for the Tibetan groups --

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the Taiwanese?

LICUANAN: And the Taiwanese as well.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are they going to be allowed to go?

LICUANAN: We don't know at this stage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Isn't there some requirement, when a government offers and is accepted as a host for an international conference of this kind, that the conference should be open to everybody who wants to come?

LICUANAN: That's correct.

LITTLEJOHNS: So in that case, the Chinese Government is not in a very strong position, is it?

BASSIR POUR: Or it shouldn't be, at least. It shouldn't exert pressure.

LICUANAN: I guess part of the issue is how you interpret these UN norms. So that is something that the UN keeps facing time and again with various groups. And the second issue would be the granting of visas by China. That has not yet been tested. There is a lot of fear, a lot of anticipation that we probably will have problems, but China has given its word that any group that is accredited for the Conference by the UN will get their visa.

LITTLEJOHNS: So the ball is back in your court, in other words.

LICUANAN: Yes, but...

LITTLEJOHNS: If the Prepcom does not accredit these people for political or other reasons, then China has no obligation to --

LICUANAN: That's correct. So, in a sense, where will the responsibility be? The UN has the responsibility to accredit according to their rules and their procedures, and after that, should one of these sort of questionable groups apply for a visa, then we have to see what China does about it. As of now, there is no proof either way. There is no proof that China will deny a visa, although they have stated their point that there are certain groups they will find impossible to grant visas to.

BASSIR POUR: Such as the Taiwanese.

DEEN: Is it true about 400 have been shut out so far?

LICUANAN: So far, 400, for various reasons, some of them pretty simple, such as inadequate information or inaccurate information. So 400 were on the initial list, out of a larger list. And remember that 1500 were approved and accredited.

BASSIR POUR: Well, 400 is a lot.

DEEN: Yes, but they're not raising the names of the 400, for whatever reasons.

LICUANAN: We have not seen the names.

DEEN: Right.

LICUANAN: There is a list.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is it public?

LICUANAN: It hasn't been openly presented to the press, but it is a public list that's available with the listing and the reasons.

LITTLEJOHNS: Can you say whether any of the 400 were able to attend previous conferences? For example, the Population Conference in Cairo?

LICUANAN: You know, quite frankly, I don't know. That seems to be an area of speculation. I think that could easily be checked. Because, I must say that this was really processed by a special committee, and they still have to give their report to us. We are hurrying them on.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Licuanan, tell us a little bit more about the Beijing Conference. What's going to come out of it? What are the goals of the Conference?

LICUANAN: Exactly. Okay, very good. Well, this is a rather indirect answer, but I had a very interesting experience in the initial preparations for the meeting. We were trying to decide on a theme and a title for the Conference. This is one of my favourite funny-type stories. The first popular choice -- this happened four years ago, still in Vienna -- was "Half the World, Half the Power". It was very popular. Everyone liked it. It represented a real paradigm shift. But people felt that was a little bit too threatening to men, and maybe we should change it to something a little bit more toned down. So the second possibility was "Partnership for Equality, Development and Peace". If you recall, equality, development and peace were the themes of Nairobi. There again, eventually, there was a technical problem. The Chinese informed us that they did not have a proper translation or a character that represented partnership which was not a partnership in marriage. So again, it was back to the drawing boards. But finally, the eventual chosen title was "Action for Equality, Development and Peace", on the assumption or the observation that the goals of Nairobi remain very valid. They're still very valid goals, and yet many of them have not yet been met. And perhaps that is because the Nairobi document was a beautiful and comprehensive wish list, and what we needed were specific actions. So those titles represent what we want to get out of Beijing: one, the

empowerment of women, and two, genuine partnership -- and this is not just a partnership between men and women, it is various types of partnerships, partnerships within government and NGOs, partnerships among women's groups, and so forth -- in order to meet the goals of Nairobi through very specific and strategic actions which we hope will come out of the approved document.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Patricia Licuanan, Chairman of the 39th Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. Afsane?

BASSIR POUR: You can't impose, of course, any of these decisions once they are taken. Now, in layman's words, what will these decisions or this Conference in Beijing change for an average woman's everyday life? Could you just tell us a few things that can actually be done to change women's lives?

LICUANAN: Well, for instance, we have various what we call areas of concern; we have 11 areas which we feel have to be addressed. These are poverty, health, education and so forth. In each section we have an analysis, and then we have strategic objectives and actions by various actors. One of the observations in this particular area, of course, is that poverty affects women in a much heavier way than men, and this is because of certain things. For instance, women really do not have access to credit of any kind. That's just the way the world works. And so one of the main strategic objectives is really to enable women to have access to credit. And it makes specific recommendations to various types of institutions about what they might do in order to make women more independent by actually having access to credit in order to handle some of the many problems or economic initiatives in their lives. So that's one very concrete thing.

Also, partly related to poverty, and certainly partly related to health and education, women still have very little access to education and health in many parts of the world; there is great unevenness in access. And so there are very proactive recommendations where access to health and access to educational services will be expanded which will specifically target women's groups, or women, particularly those who are very poor. Because existing mechanisms working the way they usually work will not make any changes. They may have the best of intentions, but unless you innovate, unless you really try out new mechanisms and new ways of doing things, women, poor women in particular, will always be short-changed. These structures don't mean to do that, they are not set up to discriminate against women but, de facto, because --

BASSIR POUR: They do.

LICUANAN: Yes. De facto, they do.

DEEN: In your programme of action you have a major problem on your hands, because the needs of women from developing countries are far different from the needs of women from developed countries. In fact, your Secretary-General, Gertrude Mongella, said recently, "While some are looking for water to wash dishes, others are looking for dishwashers." How do you plan to reconcile this in your programme of action?

LICUANAN: That's difficult. Let me say first that, aside from this global platform for action where we are trying to deal with that problem in preparation for this World Conference, we have held regional preparatory meetings, so that all regions of the world have their own platform for action, and we say that is also binding. Governments have committed themselves to those regional plans, and that certainly is where the regional differences can best be met. But still, having said that, the global platform for action, in the way it's phrased, does try to cover the needs of more developed countries as well as the needs for developing countries. And that is specified. In certain things we say "particularly in developing countries", or "particularly in the least-developed countries", and other needs are also mentioned. We have to accept as a given that women are at different stages, and the diversity of women and their circumstances have to be one of the premises of this platform.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Licuanan, it seems to me that, with the possible exception of the Nordic countries, who've always had a pretty good reputation in this area, the developed countries generally do not have too much to boast about. The recent so-called "glass ceiling commission" in the United States found that 95 per cent of CEOs of corporations were males, although only 43 per cent of the workforce were male. So, if that's the situation in the US, a highly-developed country, what do you expect elsewhere?

LICUANAN: Yes, I agree, that's a very good point to make. Women all over the world have their problems, have their obstacles to equality, but they tend to be different. That is something we share in common, that we all want equality, development and peace. How those three goals will be operationalized will vary from country to country, with one group wanting the dishwasher and another wanting the water. But most of these groups still suffer from inequality between women and men.

DEEN: What about the United Nations itself? You know, they have been complaining that not many women, only 15 per cent of the women are holding --

LICUANAN: Exactly.

DEEN: How could you resolve a problem like that?

LICUANAN: By political will, by strong advocacy, and just changing the system. The Secretary-General has said many times and in many fora that his goal is to have 50 per

cent of the positions occupied by women by the year 2000. We are a long, long way off, but...

DEEN: But the Secretary-General says that the Member States are not providing him with enough women candidates.

LICUANAN: That's true. That is also one of the recommendations in our platform for action, that governments also take responsibility for lining up women candidates, and that these candidates should be presented for positions in international bodies.

LITTLEJOHNS: So you think the UN should be more active with affirmative action, as it's called, to give preference to women when the qualifications are equal?

LICUANAN: At this point, yes, I feel so. I feel so, yes. That's the only way at this point. Again, given the normal procedures.

LITTLEJOHNS: They are doing it to some extent I think in advertising for vacancies.

LICUANAN: That's right, they actually actively look for women to fill positions.

BASSIR POUR: I'd like to go back to implementation, if I may. After the Conference in Beijing, what is the mechanism for implementing the decisions, inside the United Nations?

LICUANAN: Inside the United Nations?

BASSIR POUR: Or outside. Who is going to implement your decisions?

LICUANAN: The main responsibility for implementation belongs to the Member States. So the countries make the commitment, and, let's face it, the women are the countries, and that's really the main way to handle it. These governments have to be determined and committed and keep their end of the bargain.

BASSIR POUR: And then it's reported to the General Assembly, or how -- ?

LICUANAN: Yes, there will be a reporting mechanism. Always, the Secretary-General is asked to make a report, both to the Commission on the Status of Women as well as to ECOSOC, and then eventually to the General Assembly, on how certain things, the conventions, or how certain decisions of various conferences and summits have been implemented. And that's the normal structure.

BASSIR POUR: Is there a mechanism -- I know you probably can't do that within the context of the Conference, but can we think of some sanctions to be taken against countries who violate, for example, the rights of women in violence against women, or things that we know are going on all over the world against women? Is there any kind of sanction that might be taken by this Conference?

LICUANAN: I think the main sanction that the UN is able to impose is public opinion and how a nation therefore looks before the community of nations. That's the type

of pressure that I think is possible and that governments are quite sensitive to. But an official sanction of any kind is usually not ....

BASSIR POUR: No, a denunciation, a public --

LICUANAN: But you know, that normally works. So if everyone else is doing it and you are not, there is some pressure on governments. That's the type of thing that I think can be used.

BASSIR POUR: So we can expect you to be naming names, maybe after September?

LICUANAN: Actually, that's what happens. In reports that come out, it will be obvious which countries are actually abiding by their agreements and honouring their agreements and which ones are not. There are, of course, certain bodies, treaty bodies -- for instance, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women -- who actually receive reports and take countries to task, evaluate countries about how they have perhaps violated a convention.

LITTLEJOHNS: Professor Licuanan, I guess we've all read about the case of Flor Contemplacion, the Philippine maid who was executed in Singapore. She was one of I think 75,000 Philippine women who are working abroad.

LICUANAN: Oh, working abroad, no, much more.

LITTLEJOHNS: More? Many more than that?

LICUANAN: There's more than that.

LITTLEJOHNS: What can be done to protect people like that, who really have no defence? I mean, whether or not she was guilty or innocent, a lot of people think that she should not have been executed. But what can one do in such cases? What can the UN do? What can your Commission do? What can the Conference do?

LICUANAN: Well, certainly, that is a very important issue to the UN, to the Commission on the Status of Women as well as to the Conference. We have tackled those areas. We've had resolutions specifically focusing on the rights of migrant women workers. We have a section in the platform for action which goes to Beijing on that. And there is a lot of support I believe for the countries that initiate this type of action and this type of resolution or that type of decision. But I think the mechanisms really have to be set at all levels. Certainly it starts with a country, both sending and receiving countries. I do believe that some kind of bilateral arrangements have to be made.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ms. Licuanan, that's all the time we have. Thanks for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle. Our guest has been Patricia Licuanan, Chairman of the Thirty-Ninth Session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women. She was interviewed by Thalif Deen of Inter Press Service and Afsane Bassir Pour of *Le Monde*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle**.

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